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ABSTRACT

The contemporary literature on general education, most of which is aimed at college and university reform, is evaluated. The underlying assumptions of some of the representive works on this topic are examined, and persistent issues in the field are identified and alternatives proposed. Although the emphasis of the analysis is directed to "Missions of the College Curriculum: A Contemporary Review With Suggestions," by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, commentary is also concerned with Arthur Levine's "Handbook on Undergraduate Curriculum" (also sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation), four books by other authors, and the Bard College Center Conference paper, "The New Curriculum at Harvard," by Stanley Hoffman. It is concluded that the contemporary general education literature does not attend adequately to theoretical and historical foundations for curriculum, neglecting thereby significant alternative modes of inquiry that are merging. It is suggested that the proposals for future action are unwarranted extrapolations from surveys of contemporary practice, and that the efforts ignore the specialized curriculum knowledge of professional educators. Four alternatives to current efforts in general education curriculum reform in higher education are described, including recognizing the need for articulation between effective general education reform at the secondary level and at the postsecondary level. (SW)

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General Education: Practice without Theory

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General education re-emerged in 1978 as a significant issue in curriculum. Numerous articles, books and conference themes attest to this fact. Moreover, this issue has not been the exclusive concern of the academic community. Revisions of general education at Harvard, thirty years after the classic "Harvard Redbook" merit front page articles in the New York Times. Other publications such as Time, Newsweek, Saturday Review, and Harpers have recognized the current importance of this issue and the problems it presents both to secondary and higher education.

As I examine the contemporary literature of general education, most of which so far is aimed at college and university reform, I observe a lack of historical perspective in the writing. It also lacks any semblance of an adequate theory base. Nevertheless, these shortcomings seem not to deter general education redesign efforts. College and universities continue to design "innovative" programs and to copy "original" cores. But such efforts are destined to fail. To support this pessimistic assessment, my intentions are to examine several exemplars of contemporary general education thought to probe both their substance and to uncover their underlying assumptions. Persistent issues in the field will also be identified in this process and desirable alternatives proposed.

The Carnegie Report's Influence

The efforts of the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education have all but defined academic pursuits in higher education. In late 1977, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching released its "curricular triology": Curriculum: The American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636,

by Frederick Rudolph; Missions of the College Curriculum: A Contemporary Review with Suggestions, a commentary by the Foundation; and the Handbook on Undergraduate Curriculum, by Arthur Levine.

The latter two works comprise what many academics view as a definitive statement for curriculum in the 1970's and 1980's. The Missions of the College Curriculum, self-described as "a comprehensive, policy-oriented treatment of curriculum problems and possibilities in American colleges and universities," is therefore the focus for this discussion. Although Missions deals with a wide range of issues and problems, only one of which is general education, reflection on how the report treats such an important curricular matter is useful in assessing the approach the study takes to other related topics. Too, it reveals what might be viewed as the "Carnegie position" on general education, a position implicit in several of the other reports.

Clearly, Missions's timeliness and its prestigious backing suggest that it will influence the thinking of those engaged in reconceiving general education. If initial reactions are any indication, Change says that Missions is "must reading for any academic professional worth his or her name;" and Choice is quoted: "The rethinking of the concerns for general education in Chapter 8 are probably the most significant thoughts on this crucial area since the report of the Harvard Committee, General Education in a Free Society (1945)." A February 13, 1979, Chronicle of Higher Education review by Charles Adams states: "...the Carnegie Foundation's Missions has great potential value for both the curricular journeyman and the apprentice. It should be read and used as a resource by legislators, faculty members of educational policy committees, and academic administrators."

Does the report warrant this crucial role it has been assigned in the new general education movement? Does it, indeed, provide an adequate base for curricular redesign in colleges and universities? Early on, one wonders about the answers it

will give to such questions when, for example in the Preface, the authors state:

> We start from where we are.... We begin with current practices.... We do not, however, attempt to discuss in any depth the relation between historical developments and current curricular practices nor to examine the connection between the curriculum of today and the contemporary cultural and intellectual climate. (1.)

At the outset, then, Missions's research commits itself largely to principles based on the tabulation of current practices, the realm of "what is." This intent is clear in its subtitle: "A Contemporary Review." One would expect, therefore, a review of current practices. But the subsequent suggestions for action, those "firm conclusions and related recommendations for action," as the report describes, rest upon very questionable grounds. For example, we see the authors address the issue of change and make speculations for the future with little attention to the past or without any attention to basic value questions. Yet, the recommendations are quite normative in nature in that they are assertions about what "ought to be."

Valid proposals for the redesign of curriculum at any level are clearly both descriptive and prescriptive, or normative. This is to say that they cannot avoid the "what ought to be" value questions. To do so would seem to assert that everything "out there" somewhere in culture is equally educative. No one assumes that those who collaborated on this report would support this view. Yet, the Missions report does not come to grips with this tough foundations problem.

Each of its chapters, thirteen following an orientation chapter, discusses a particular aspect of curriculum such as external influences, electives, basic skills, the world of work, and the like. Most chapters have brief historical overviews of these aspects. Resources viewed as useful for further inviestigation in each of these areas are identified. But the fact remains that the basic sources of material for discussion and projection of recommendations are data arrived at through extensive tabulation of current practices-- what is going on "out there." Social scientists, even those working within the traditional natural

science paradigm, would call this an example of "dust bowl empiricism." The most thoughtful of them would be skeptical of direct extrapolations about what ought to be from such data sources.

If Missions is representative of authoritative proposals for new directions in higher education-- and its widespread endorsements tend to suggest that it is-- then colleges and universities are unlikely to move into the 1980's with anything like a bold, new visions appropriate for a new decade. Missing not only from this Missions report but also from the scene at large are the insight and vision that characterized some of the leaders who in the past have exerted profound influence in higher education and, in turn, college curricula. One is reminded of Andrew D. White, Nicholas M. Butler, William Rainey Harper of the late 19th and early 20th centuries as well as Hutchins, Stringfellow Barr, Conant, and Harold Taylor in more recent times. These were scholar-leaders who took a larger view of the nature of education and in that context made significant proposals for curriculum development and reform.

In contrast, Missions seems to undermine the importance of a broad perspective. In its preface, it tends to dismiss historical, philosophical and cultural bases. Cogent, powerful expressions of need and directions formulated by thoughtful scholars or experienced college presidents seem to have little or no place in the review. Credence is given instead to the tabulation of catalogues or questionnaires. At its best, this approach results in data similar to that collected by Howard Bowen, an undertaking discussed and presumable endorsed by the report. It states:

> In order to develop a schematic foundation for his extensive study of the consequences of American higher education, Howard Bowen examined more than 1,000 goal statements in "writings of noted educational philosophers and critics of the past and present, reports of public commissions and faculty committees, and statements of leading educators in speeches, articles, and institutional reports"(H. Bowen, 1977, p. 53). From these statements, he has compiled a "catalog" that includes more than a score of categories of "goals for individual students." (2.)

The Missions report suggests that Bowen's findings should not "necessarily form the basis of any specific institutional mission statement" but that they do "suggest the range of subject matter that deserves consideration in framing such a statement." (3.)

This approach to finding a solid base for curriculum change is reminicent of the activity analysis movement that was in vogue in the 1920's and early 1930's. One is reminded of the work of W.W. Charters in the 1929 Commonwealth Study of Teachers. Charters, in the name of being "scientific", tabulated and categorized 1001 competencies that "good" teachers hould have. These were based on the specific activities good teachers were observed to be performing at that time. Without some knowledge of how inadequate the Commonwealth Study and others like it have proved to be as a base for curriculum development, the gross inadequacies of the approach are perpetuated fifty years later.

Yet another example further underscores this presumed "scientific" approach. Arthur Levine's Handbook on Undergraduate Curriculum defines types, components, and content of general education programs from the 1976 Carnegie Council Catalog Study. One must question the reliability and validity of these statements--statements which reflect "practical realities" of education and the realm of "what is." Indeed, the Missions report, itself, warns that missions statements "should be made in clear language that avoids the sales rhetoric often encountered in the introduction to college catalogs and recruiting brochures. (4.) Yet, Levine tends to draw upon such data as a sound base for formulating and implementing curricular policy and change. He continues to use a tabulating approach even in his effort to define the term "general education." (5.)

But in the broadest sense, Levine and the Missions authors seem not to be aware of a number of alternatives that now characterize some of the most significant research and theory building efforts in the realms of political and social science

theory. Or if aware, they have chosen consciously to bypass or deny the relevance of such efforts for the field of higher education and more particularly for curriculum reform at all levels.

Building upon some of these alternative modes of inquiry reflected in the work of Jurgen Habermas and Alfred Schutz, to cite the work of but two individuals, is an emerging body of principles of education. These principles, in turn, are generating significant new directions for curriculum development. Educators such as Joseph Schwab, Daniel Bell, and A.C.D. Peterson use this knowledge as they make proposals for curriculum reform. So, too, do philosophers such as Paul Hirst, Harry Broudy, Maxine Greene, and Philip Phenix who have taken curriculum as a focus for their own speculative efforts. Other than a brief passing reference to Phenix in which the Missions's authors attribute his work as a rationale for specialization (6.) (Did the authors really read Realms of Meaning?), the significant body of knowledge being generated in the field of curriculum theory is bypasses.

The 1979 Bard Conference

The January, 1979, conference at Bard College Center promised more comprehensive general education theory. Its title was, indeed, promising: "What Ought To Be Taught? The New Movement in General Education: Its Impact on High Schools & Colleges." And the conference lectures suggested a stronger historical dimension since spokepersons included representatives from Harvard, Chicago, Columbia, Antioch, and Amherst, all institutions with historic general education programs.

Although there were many more definitions of general education (which Levine might use to extend his list), the speakers showed no knowledge of theory and history of general education. The conference abounded with normative statements, projections, and suggestions for the future of education. Rarely, if ever, were the classic works of general education theory cited or incorporated into the

proposals. For example, not once was Daniel Bell's The Reforming of General Education cited. It is difficult to see how any broad gauge probing of general education can be undertaken without heavy reliance on Bell's thinking and the concept, "modes of inquiry," as a curriculum design feature.

The discussions at "What Ought To Be Taught?" were serious and, at times, heated. But the tenor of the comments were primarily administrative rather than theoretical. Stanley Hoffman's comments at a well-attended session are characteristic.

Seemingly unaware of the massive criticism of the Harvard Redbook at the time of its release, Mr. Hoffman talked of the current "political difficulties" of general education curricular reform at Harvard:

> What was clear was that the Red Book notion of simply traditional Western history, past-oriented liberal education, was no longer sufficient. What was not clear was the one vision that could take its place. So we all listened to fascinating debates about the rationale with a capital "R", and having listened to all of those debates, we ended up with a compromise. If you don't believe in compromise, the exercise we went through is, of course, very mediocre and very simple. Committees never produce something transcendent. No committee will sound like, Mr. Hutchins or Thoreau. Still, the result was not simply log rolling although there was some of that too. (7.)

> In other words, what we ended up doing, and this is one of the reasons why the scheme has come under attack, is effect a compromise between various approaches: skills plus the kind of basic knowledge which most members of the faculty could agree on as being essential for somebody who graduates from a college in the 1970's, plus that element of values, if you like, or character if you prefer. (8.)

Compromise and detente may be the new way of life for the post-secondary curriculum diplomat. But the discussions and presentations at Bard displayed neither original thought nor serious attempt to develop general education theory.

Persistent Problems of General Education

General education and the form it take presents persistent problems. Charles Wegener, author of Liberal Education and the Modern University and the Howard L. Willett Professor in the College and Chairman of the Committee on Ideas and Methods

at the University of Chicago, underscores and exemplifies a major difficulty:

> The problem of liberal education is to institutionalize those intellectual circumstances under which it is maximally probable that the reflective moment of intellectual activity will serve the purpose of permanently transforming the relationship of an individual mind to the intellectual world so that persons may become freely functioning participants in the intellectual activity and autonomous members of the intellectual community. It is possible that the statement is more formidable than the problem, but that remains to be seen. (9.)

Recent attempts to address such issues have not proved encouraging. Again, let us turn to Missions of the College Curriculum and examine specifically what it has to say about the nature of general education.

References are made to general education throughout the volume, but Chapter 8, entitled "General Education: An Idea in Distress," centers on it directly. The authors assert that general education is a "disaster area" and "on the defensive and losing ground for more than 100 years." A clue to many of the problems one finds in the discussion of general education in this chapter and its treatment in the report as a whole is found in the definition they formulate:

> general education is a mediating influence that, through institution-wide requirements, ensures that all students obtain, from the many courses and programs and institution may make available, some knowledge of the ideas and culture that were once themes of the total liberal arts college. It does so by providing learning that:
> 1.) Builds skills for advanced studies and lifelong learning
> 2.) Distributes time available for learning in such a way as to expose students to the mainstreams of thought and interpretation-- humanities, science, social science, and the arts
> 3.) Integrates learning in ways that cultivate the student's broad understanding and ability to think about a large and complex subject. (10.)

To criticize but one aspect of this definition-- namely, the direct causal relationship posited between content and manifested student behaviours, as seen in such expressions as "ensures that all students obtain"-- is to underscore the oversimplification of the view taken. The failure of many current efforts to achieve "accountability" is based on such an assumed relationship. Jacques Barzun

called such activity "educational nonsense." (11.) It is undoubtedly a contributing factor to the widespread cynicism that many college professors feel toward any kind of curriculum development effort, much less general education reform.

The commentary in the report also distinguishes between the various components of general education. It is implied that curriculum planners must take these into account and provide coordination among the components in order to accomplish the specified learning outcomes. For example, one component cited is "advanced learning skills." Immediately, the authors question how advanced and to what degree should secondary education provide these foundations for general education. The report recognized that some high schools are indeed providing such instruction, but that this matter "cannot be left to chance."

> Colleges have an obligation to make clear to the high schools which skills they expect their students to acquire before they are admitted. In addition, they should make clear which of the skill subjects they offer might also be taught at high schools and what the criteria are for recognizing completion of such instruction as satisfying college requirements. (12.)

The potential for widespread disagreement among the various colleges and state boards of education is not acknowledged. But to engage in a modest understatement, such matters could prove troublesome should action be taken on these recommendations. The ease in which this "obligation" could become competency-oriented is noticed when the report states:

> ...the advanced learning skills components of general education are particularly well-suited to instruction in nontraditional modes. Such programs can be competency-based even when other parts of the curriculum are not. Many of them also can be adapted easily for personalized self-instruction, audio-tutorial presentation, and presentation in a series of brief learning modules. (13.)

The recent history of competency-based efforts adumbrates the trouble one might expect in this highly oversimplified proposal. (14.)

Persistent theoretical issues of general education go unaddressed in the Missions

report. The dilemma of "breadth vs. depth," a topic which would dominate any thoughtful treatment of survey courses; the general education design criticism of "permanance:" the curricular issue of balance; the "utility" of a general education; the basic purpose of a general education: these are but a few of the crucial issues. These and others are implicit in the statements and proposals of Missions. But instead of addressing "the issues" directly, the authors merely cite alternative programs. It is assumed then that administrators can make a selection from among the alternatives without giving thought to foundational issues. This is not the "policy-oriented" treatment of curriculum problems that Missions identified itself as taking.

Finally, Missions does not examine the relevant knowledge base thoroughly enough to warrant the most extreme of its general education recommendations. In the conclusion to the general education chapter, this "advice" is offered:

> If colleges cannot define what they intend to accomplish in general education, cannot specifically describe how it will benefit the students who engage in it, and cannot deliver an effective general education component, they should seriously consider eliminating it entirely. (15.)

Much more could be said about weaknesses in the report's treatment of general education. Early on, attention was called to the overall neglect of history and theory in the volume a a whole. This neglect is very evident in the approach it takes to general education. The classic criticisms of general education at Columbia, Chicago, and Harvard are not brought forth in the discussion. Individuals such as Hutchins and Harold Taylor, the acknowledged champion of general education in his pioneering experiment as president of Sarah Lawrence, go unmentioned.

I have explored at length, in this brief overview of problems and issues, the Carnegie Missions report because it is typical of the contemporary curriculum literature that focuses on general education curriculum reform in higher education. Relatively few proposals are yet forthcoming in the literature of secondary school

curriculum. One may assume that in the next several years there will be an avalanche of secondary school general education proposals.

In essence, my dissatisfaction with what I had anticipated would be a significant platform for college curriculum reform in the 1980's and beyond--especially curriculum reform that provided for a redesign of general education--may be summarized in the following three points: 1.) The contemporary general education literature does not attend adequately to theoretical and historical foundation for curriculum change, neglecting thereby significant alternative modes of inquiry that are emerging. 2.) The proposals for future action are unwarranted extrapolations from surveys of contemporary practice. 3.) The efforts ignore the specialized curriculum knowledge of professional educators, perpetuating further the gap within the community of scholars who are concerned with curriculum reform.

Future Developments

Early in this discussion, I predicted failure for the current efforts underway in general education curriculum reform in colleges and universities. I have identified as a major shortcoming their lack of adequate foundational bases in theory. This lack clearly shows up in the new Harvard Core proposal, the Carnegie Missions report, and a major conference held to focus attention on general education reform-- to cite but a few instances. But these weaknesses also permeate the curriculum literature of higher education as a whole.

Given this state of the field, efforts to move in more promising directions in the 1980's should, from my perspective, attend to these alternatives:

1. Efforts must be made to provide greater contact between professional educators with curriculum knowledge and the academics in colleges and universities who are most often involved in curriculum reform proposals. The GEM Project to provide a "clearing house" could well be a mechanism for such an exchange of ideas

and subsequent dialogue and collaboration.

2. The need for articulation between effective general education reform at the secondary-school level and the college and university level must be recognized. The prevalent idea that secondary schools will provide only the basic skills upon which more adequate general education can be built in post-secondary institutions requires examination. A "top down" analysis of general education needs will not suffice.

3. Genuine curriculum research and experimentation must be built into the general education efforts to reform. Much of the innovation underway tends to be merely "demonstrations" called experimentation. Little, if any, attention is paid to careful assessment of the changes. Yet, there exists an increasingly significant body of curriculum development knowledge that could serve as a base for needed experimentation and evaluation. Grant and Riesman recognize this need when they urge both "more inventiveness" and a "willingness to experiment" with the possibility of failure. (16.)

4. Curriculum theory as a field of inquiry should be utilized more fully in general education curriculum reform efforts. This is clearly implicit in the needs identified above. But it also suggests that increased efforts be made to prepare historical and philosophical studies of curriculum development that focus directly on general education. Such efforts would counteract the ahistorical and atheoretical stance of much current general education reform activities.

Footnotes

1.) Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Missions of the College Curriculum: A Contemporary Review with Suggestions (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1977), pp. xi-xii.

2.) Ibid., pp. 155-156.

3.) Ibid., p. 156.

4.) Ibid., p. 181.

5.) Arthur Levine, Handbook on Undergraduate Curriculum (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1978) pp. 3-4.

6.) Missions of the College Curriculum, p. 186.

7.) Stanley Hoffman, "The New Curriculum at Harvard," Bard College Center Conference, January 18-19, 1979, pp. 7-8.

8.) Ibid., p. 9.

9.) Charles Wegener, Liberal Education and the Modern University (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 95

10.) Missions of the College Curriculum, pp. 164-165.

11.) Jacques Barzun,"Where the Educational Nonsense Comes From," in Papers on Educational Reform, Vol. II (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court Pub. Co., 1971), pp. 1-13.

12.) Missions of the College Curriculum, p. 168.

13.) Ibid., p. 169.

14.) Ralph Smith, et. al., Regaining Educational Leadership (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1975).

15.) Missions of the College Curriculum, pp. 184-185.

16.) Gerald Grant, Riesman, David, The Perpetual Dream (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 8.